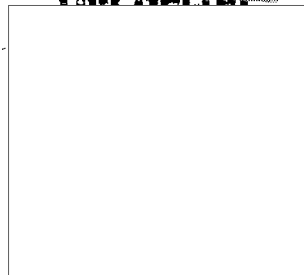


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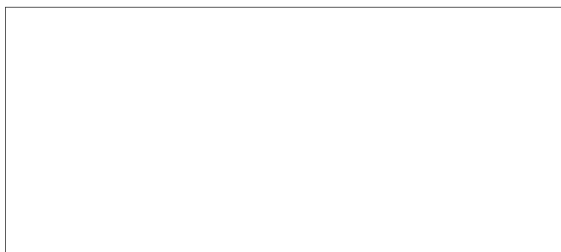
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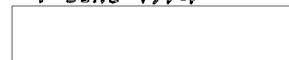
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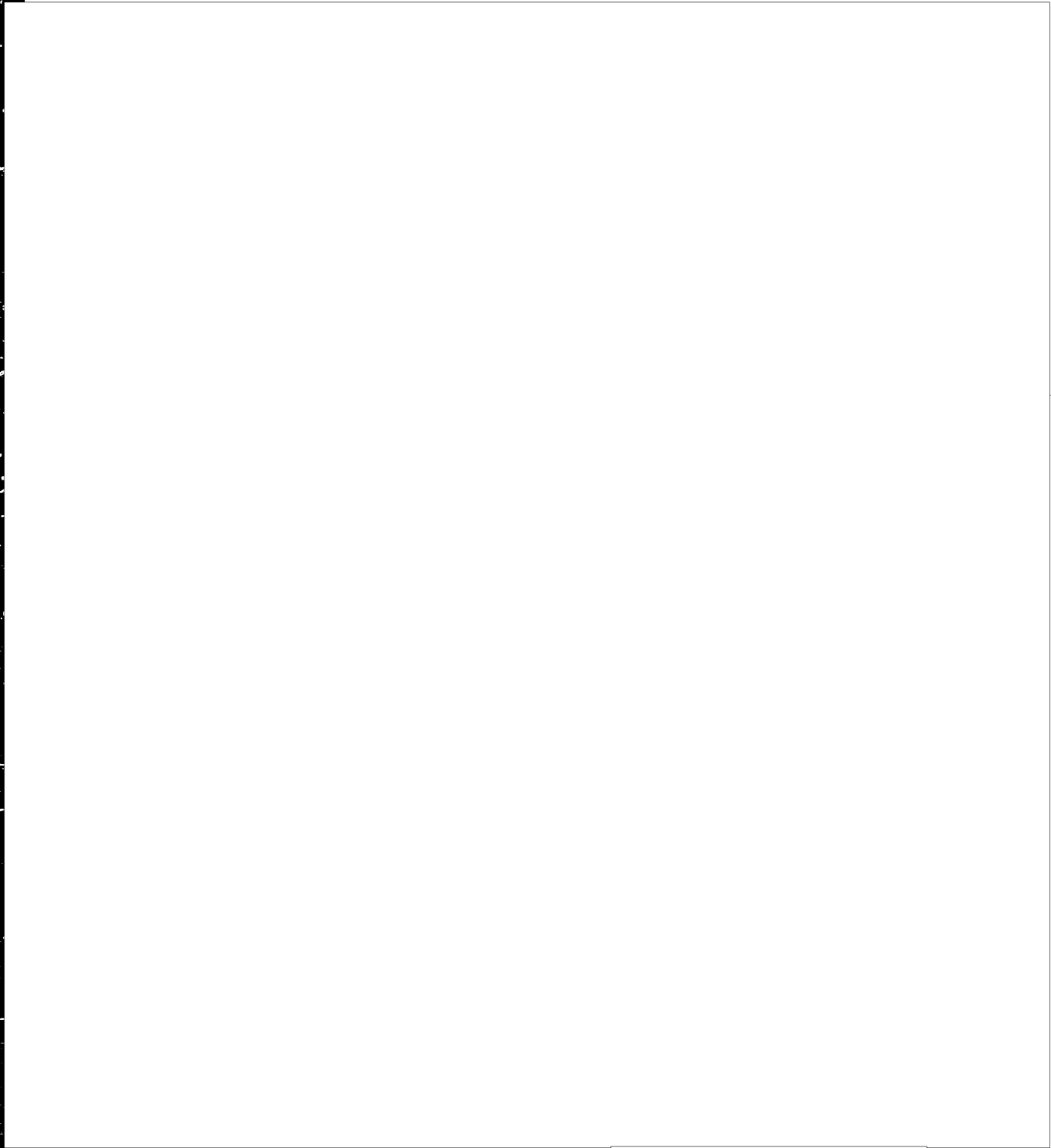
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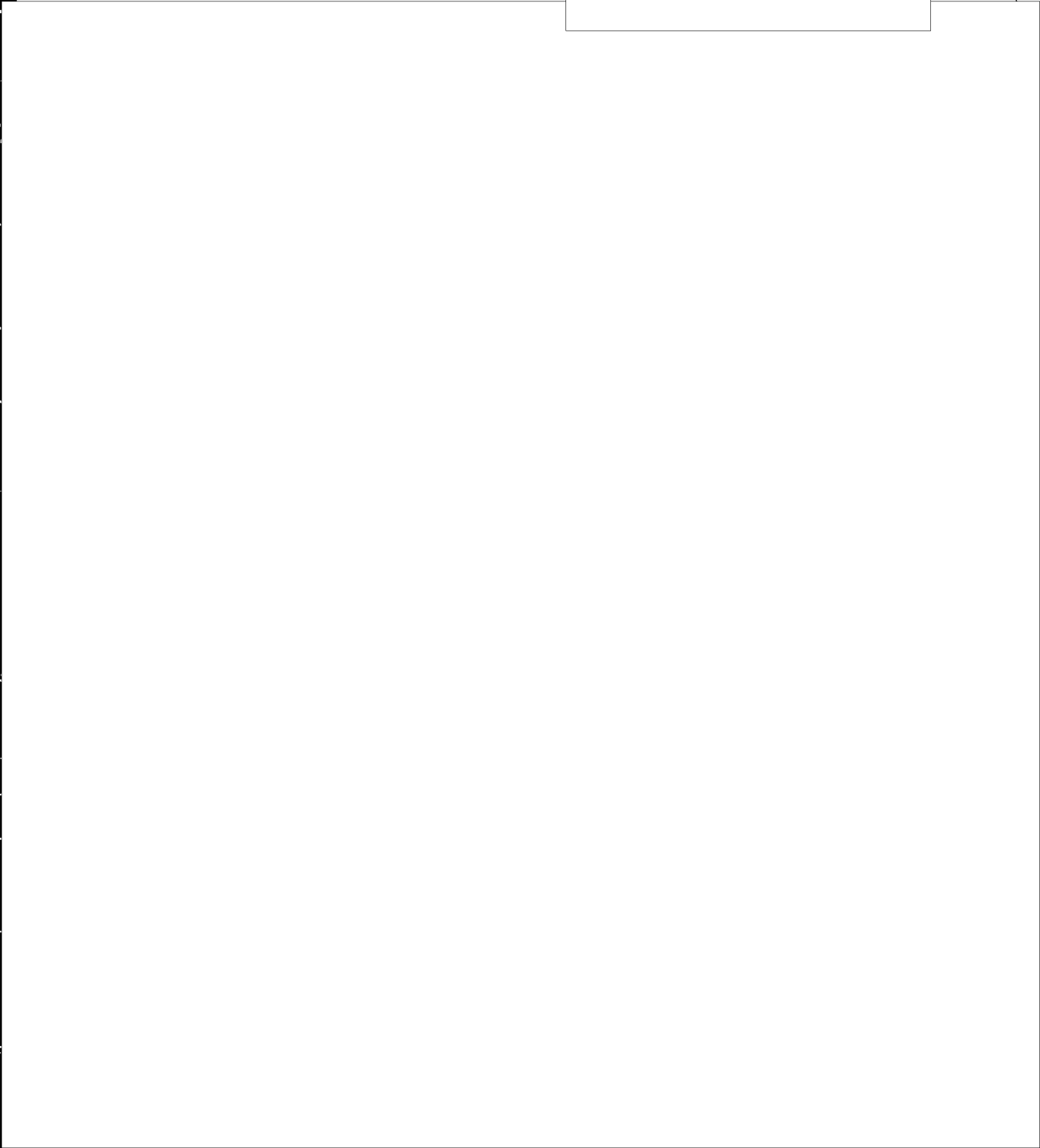
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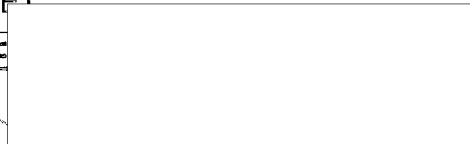
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~~TOP SECRET~~**LAOS: COMMUNIST TROOPS STAY ON**

The 60-day period for the withdrawal of all foreign military personnel from Laos ran out this week, but only the US and Thailand complied fully with the deadline of June 4. On the communist side, sizable numbers of North Vietnamese troops are still in Laos, and they show no signs of leaving. Chinese engineering and support troops also remain in northwestern Laos.

There are now an estimated 47,000 North Vietnamese troops in Laos. Of this total, 37,000—including four combat infantry regiments—are in central and southern Laos, while the remaining 10,000—including two combat infantry regiments—are based in northern Laos.

Approximately three fourths of the North Vietnamese personnel are concerned primarily with supporting Hanoi's war effort in South Vietnam by keeping supplies and personnel moving along the eastern Lao infiltration corridor, and they will stay there in force for some time.

Besides their priority interest in using the bulk of their forces in Laos for infiltration and logistic purposes, the North Vietnamese are evidently determined to keep a limited main force combat presence in parts of the Lao interior—at least for the time being. This presence is aimed in part at preventing potential rightist military moves against the so-called "liberated areas" or against the new coalition government itself. In addition, Hanoi evidently plans to continue to train, advise, and to some extent logistically support the Pathet Lao until the North Vietnamese are convinced that the Lao Communists can hold their own against the Lao army, and can do reasonably well in future general elections.

As for the Chinese, Peking similarly intends to continue to exert an influence in Laos, in part through diplomatic activity in Vientiane but also through its road-building activities in the northwest. While it is true that nearly all of Peking's combat forces have left Laos, the 23,000 or so engineer and support troops who remain are regular members of the People's Liberation Army. The Chinese may consider these road-construction and maintenance forces a useful counterweight to the more substantial number of North Vietnamese troops in Laos. They may also see them as a contribution to the Pathet Lao cause equal to that made by Hanoi.

In addition to failing to abide by the troop withdrawal deadline, the communists have blocked progress on a prisoner exchange. Although June 4 was also the deadline for the return of prisoners of war of all nationalities, none have been exchanged and there is little prospect for their early release.

The Pathet Lao admit to holding only one American prisoner—civilian contract pilot Emmet Kay—who was captured on May 7, 1973. This week, a Pathet Lao spokesman in Vientiane told the press that Kay would not be released because "the US had refused" to abide by the peace agreement in Laos. Besides Kay, four other Americans are believed to have been captured in Laos prior to the cease-fire agreement of February 1973, and 314 are listed as missing in action.

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